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ABSTRACT

A study examined the claim that computer-mediated discussion groups, also known as "lists," "conferences," or "bulletin boards" in which individuals contribute electronically to an ongoing exchange of information and ideas within a field of common interest, affect participation by women. Examination of the claim was accomplished by analyzing patterns of participation in the LINGUIST list, a computer-mediated linguistics discussion group containing over 1,800 subscribers internationally. While 46% of the regular members of the 1991 Linguistic Society of America were women, women comprise only 36% of LINGUIST subscribers. During a 2.5 month period, 71 messages, by 42 contributors, initially centered on the term "cognitive linguistics" were analyzed. The number of women contributors, number of contributions by gender, average words per contribution, and total words contributed were examined. An anonymous survey was conducted on the list concerning reasons for female nonparticipation in the discussion. Results of the discourse analysis and survey suggest that while both men and women respond negatively to adversarial discourse such as this one, women respond differently on the basis of their negative reactions, producing less adversarial discourse and participating less in adversarial exchanges altogether. It is concluded that gender-based communication preferences may inhibit women from participating in even professionally beneficial activities. Adoption of the rhetoric of male success is seen as a more participatory alternative. The survey form is appended. (MSE)

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Gender and Participation in Computer-Mediated Linguistic Discourse

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1. Introduction*

In recent decades, computer technology has revolutionized communication within the academic profession. One corollary has been the rise of computer discussion groups (also known as "lists", "conferences", or "bulletin boards"), whereby individual participants contribute electronically to an on-going public exchange of information and ideas within a field of common interest. Participation in such groups offers a variety of rewards to the aspiring academic professional: information on professional meetings and job openings; assistance with data, references, analyses, and the like; as well as more intangible benefits: a feeling of participation and belonging, being up-to-the-minute on the latest issues, and asserting one's 'presence' within the field. Some observers have associated broader social advantages with computer discussion groups as well: women, students, and others traditionally 'silenced' because of their status in the academic hierarchy may be more equally represented, i.e. as a consequence of the relative anonymity provided by login names that mask the identity of the participant (Graddol and Swann, 1989). The potential social and professional consequences of participation in computer discussion groups create an urgent need for sociolinguistic research on this emergent discourse type (Ferrara, Brunner, and Whittemore, 1991).

The present paper examines the claim that computer-mediated discussions affect participation by women by analyzing patterns of participation in a group within the field of linguistics itself: the LINGUIST list. As of this writing, LINGUIST has been in existence for thirteen months and has more than 1800 subscribers internationally. It serves as a major distributor of information as well as a forum for debate on linguistics-related issues. The advantages of subscription are appreciated by both male and female linguists. In a recent message thanking the LINGUIST moderators for starting the list, one woman writes: "It has surely changed my life: sparked my thinking, strengthened my sense of participation in the field, and generally, I think, enhanced the humanness of all of us by putting us in touch with each other." Yet women are not represented equally on LINGUIST. While 46% of the regular members of the 1991 Linguistic Society of America were women, women comprise only 36% of LINGUIST subscribers.[1] Moreover, there are disparities in the ways in which men and women contribute. While both genders ask and provide answers to information questions, women participate far less than men in discussions of theoretical issues.

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* This paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, Philadephia, January 9-12, 1992.

[1] These figures are estimates based on a count of member/subscriber names from which gender can reliably be inferred.

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2. The investigation

In order to investigate this phenomenon, I analyzed 71 messages contributed to LINGUIST between February 2 and April 20, 1991, all initially centered around the use of the term "cognitive linguistics", and continued later (after the "cognitive linguistics" debate was terminated by the moderators) under the heading "functional linguistics". This extended discussion, which involved 42 contributors and more than 26,000 words, touched on a number of issues of general linguistic interest: among others, the autonomous or non-autonomous nature of linguistic knowledge, falsifiability and proof in linguistic argumentation, and the essential differences between formal and functional approaches to linguistic analysis. It was a lively discussion, in which many different points of view were expressed. These points of view, however, were contributed overwhelmingly by men. Table 1 shows the participation figures for the "cognitive/functional linguistics" discussion:

	Female	Male	Ratio F:M
number of contributors	5	30	1:6.0
number of contributions	18 (13 by 1 woman)	53	1:2.9
ave. words per contribution	216.5	424.0	1:2.0
total words contributed	3,897 (2,926 by 1 woman)	22,472	1:5.8

Table 1: Participation in the "cognitive/functional linguistics" discussion

Six times fewer women than men contributed to the discussion under analysis. This is a considerable disparity, even adjusting the ratio to reflect the overall lower percentage of women subscribers to LINGUIST.[2] We may add to this the observation that when women did contribute, their messages were on the average only half as long as those of the men. To further tip the scales, 72.2% of the messages and 75% of the total words contributed by women were the output of a single individual, who would normally be treated as a separate population for purposes of statistical analysis.

Unlike in the computer discussion groups reported on by Swann and Graddol (1989), contributions to LINGUIST are often signed, and between signatures and login names, it is almost always possible to ascertain the gender of the contributor. This fact alone does not of course explain the low rate of female participation in the LINGUIST discussion. Why didn't more women contribute? At least four different hypotheses suggest themselves, based in part on stereotypes of gender-based behavior:

[2] The adjusted ratio is 1:3.9.

i) Women were **less interested** than men in the topic(s).

ii) Women were **too busy** (e.g. with teaching and/or family) to participate.

iii) Women were inhibited from participating due to **inexperience with/fear of computer communication technology**.

iv) Women were **intimidated** by the tone of the debate.

In order to determine which (if any) of these hypotheses were correct, I examined data from two sources. First, I prepared and distributed on the LINGUIST list an anonymous survey (see appendix) in which I recalled the "cognitive linguistics" debate,[3] and asked subscribers who had not participated why they had not done so. The second half of the survey requested background information about the respondents: their gender, academic status, years since completion of Ph.D, teaching load, principal area of specialization within linguistics, and experience with computers. At the same time, I subjected the 71 messages of the "cognitive/functional linguistics" debate to a discourse-level analysis to determine whether gender-based differences were present in the language employed by the participants.

3. Results

Survey

64 LINGUIST subscribers responded to the survey; 61 by electronic mail, and three by regular mail. Of the 64, 37.5% were women, and 62.5% were men (a ratio virtually identical to that of the gender breakdown for subscription to LINGUIST). All answered the following two-part question (question 2 in the survey):

a. Did you contribute to the "cognitive linguistics" discussion?

b. If you did not contribute, explain as fully as you can why not (not interested in topic; interested but too busy; interested but felt intimidated, etc.)

19% of those who responded to the survey had participated in the original discussion; the responses of the remaining 81% to part b. of the question are summarized in table 2:

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[3] The survey was intended to focus respondents on the first part of the "cognitive/functional linguistics" debate, i.e. 48 contributions submitted under the heading "cognitive" or "autonomous" linguistics. However respondents did not distinguish between the "cognitive" and the "functional" phases of the discussion, but rather included the latter as a continuation of the former. I therefore expanded the scope of the investigation to include contributions labelled "functional" as well as "cognitive/autonomous", for a total of 71 messages.

	not interested	too busy	intimidated	annoyed
Female	9.5%	14.3%	61.9%	14.3%
Male	25.8%	16.1%	51.6%	19.4%
Both	19.2%	15.4%	55.8%	17.3%[4]

Table 2: Reasons given by non-participants for not participating

The original survey question included three suggested reasons for non-participation: 'not interested', 'too busy', or 'intimidated'. Respondents tended to select from among these reasons, with the exception that a certain percentage specified an additional reason, i.e. that they had felt annoyed or turned off by the discussion. The 'annoyed' responses in many cases appeared to be a reaction to feeling 'intimidated'.[5]

The results in table 2 provide interesting counter-evidence to two of the hypotheses proposed above to account for why women participate less. To begin with, the female linguists on the list were **not** less interested than men in the "cognitive/functional linguistics" discussion, at least according to self-report. On the contrary, more than two-and-a-half times as many men cited lack of interest as a reason for not participating, and 'not interested' accounted for the fewest female responses in any of the four categories mentioned.

Similarly, fewer women than men reported that they were too busy to respond. This result is particularly interesting in light of the responses to another question, in which respondents were asked how many courses they had been teaching during the time of the "cognitive linguistics" debate (Feb./March 1991), and how many courses they taught per year. The averaged answers to these questions are presented by gender in table 3:

	in Feb./March 1991	academic year
Female	1.81 courses	4.25 courses
Male	1.38 courses	3.76 courses

Table 3: Teaching load (for respondents with teaching positions)

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[4] Several male respondents cited more than one reason for their lack of participation; consequently, the total percentages for the second and third rows add up to slightly more than 100%.

[5] This is especially evident in reponses to the third question on the survey, in which respondents were asked to comment more generally on their reaction to the discussion. For example, a respondent who indicated that he had not participated because he "felt intimidated -- have had past unpleasant experiences being flamed", elaborated further that the discussion was "very my camp vs. your camp (...) It was the indirect snideness and smugness that seemed most offensive to me (...) Ultimately I became weary and a bit disgusted with the whole thing and stopped reading".

According to self-report, female linguists were teaching on the average one-half course more than their male counterparts at the time of the "cognitive/functional linguistics" debate. Yet women still gave 'too busy' as a reason less often than did men.

As regards inexperience and/or fear of computer communication technology, none of the respondents mentioned anything having to do with computers as a reason for their lack of participation. Still, it is to be expected that the respondents would be reasonably comfortable with computers, given that all but three (one female, two males) responded by computer to a computer-disseminated survey. The average number of years of computer use was equally high for women and for men: 11.4 for women, 11.5 for men. However, differences emerged in response to a question asking the respondents to indicate how comfortable they felt with computer technology:

	very comfortable	moderately comfortable	somewhat hesitant
Female	60.9%	26.1%	13.0%
Male	74.4%	25.6%	0%

Table 4: Degree of comfort with computer technology

While the clear majority of respondents of both sexes indicated that they felt 'very comfortable', 'completely competent', etc. using a computer, fewer women than men placed themselves in this category. At the opposite end of the scale, 13% of the female respondents expressed feelings of hesitancy, as opposed to none of the men. These differences suggest that men are more self-confident regarding their computer skills, a finding which may account for the fact that the percentage of women who subscribe to LINGUIST is lower than the percentage of women in the field of linguistics in general. Yet as the survey shows, those women who do subscribe are capable of responding electronically to messages in the discussion group if they choose to do so.

What, then, leads them to choose otherwise? We come now to the fourth hypothesis proposed above, namely that the women were intimidated by the tone of the LINGUIST debate. The overwhelming majority – 61% – of female respondents surveyed wrote that they did not participate because they felt intimidated. They often rationalized this response as a function of their relative lack of expertise in the topic under discussion or their newness to the field of linguistics and/or to the LINGUIST list. But as one female assistant professor observed: "This particular discussion – not my area of interest or expertise. But just between you and me, I would find it somewhat intimidating to contribute on something even if it was my area of interest or expertise".

51% of the male respondents said that they felt intimidated as well. Many rationalized that they had nothing new or insightful to add to the "cognitive linguistics" discussion: "I have rather little to add to the debate other than a wish that they ["functional" linguists employing the term "cognitive linguistics"] had chosen a different, more applicable name." The same man goes on to add, however: "As a junior

professor. I am well aware of the potential danger of entering into what seemed an emotionally charged debate". A male graduate student vividly connects intimidation, having nothing to say, and the dangers of participation: "I am very interested in the topic, but was a little intimidated because of both my relative lack of experience in linguistics, and how participants seemed to relish ripping each others lungs out at any opening". Combining the 'intimidated' responses with the 'annoyed' responses accounts for more than 70% of the reasons given by both men and women for not having participated in what they found to be an otherwise interesting debate. Although this result does not explain why women participated less often than men, it is a finding worthy of further examination.

Discourse analysis

What intimidated and/or offended more than 70% of LINGUIST subscribers about the "cognitive/functional linguistics" debate? The answer to this question may provide the key to explaining the observed differences in male and female participation.

A close examination of the texts of the messages produced by the participants in the debate reveals two distinct clusterings of linguistic and rhetorical features. These clusterings might be said to define two discourse styles, which I term **adversarial** and **attenuated/ personal**. The most salient features of each style are summarized in table 5:

Adversarial style	Attenuated/personal style
- strong assertions; absolute and exceptionless adverbials e.g. certainly, definitely, obviously, never, by no means	- attenuated assertions; hedges and qualifiers e.g. perhaps, may, might, seems, sort of, rather, somewhat, a bit
- imperative forms of verbs e.g. notice, note, observe that ...	- exhortations phrased as suggestions e.g. let's/why don't we ...
- impersonal, presupposed truths e.g. It is { obvious / clear / a fact } that ...	- speaker's feelings/experiences I feel that ... I am intrigued by ... ... I get all worked up.
- exclusive 1st person plural pronouns	- inclusive 1st person plural pronouns
- rhetorical questions	- questions as a means to elicit a response
- sarcasm	
- self-promotion	- apologies
- representation of opponent's views as ridiculous	

Table 5: Linguistic and rhetorical features of two discourse styles

The **adversarial** style is characterized by strong assertions, imperatives, exclusive use of 1pl. pronouns,[6] and an overall tendency to promote oneself while belittling one's conversational "adversary". The **attenuated/personal** style combines features of attenuation – hedges, qualification, apologies – with an emphasis on personal aspects of the communication, both in terms of the speaker (mention of self's feelings and experiences), and the interaction between speaker and addressee (response-seeking questions; inclusive use of 1pl. pronouns). In addition to these two styles, there is an unmarked or **neutral** style characterized by a relative lack of either adversarial or attenuated/personal features. Although none of these three styles is attested in a pure form, it is possible to characterize contributions as more or less adversarial, attenuated/personal, or neutral based on concentrations (or lack) of the relevant features.

Of the five women who contributed to the debate, all but one made regular use of attenuated/personal strategies. In addition, two women employed some adversarial features, one quite noticeably so (the participant referred to previously who was responsible for the majority of messages contributed by women). Examples (1) and (2) illustrate features of attenuation and personal/interpersonal focus, including qualifiers/hedges (may, a bit, essentially, almost), questions, an apology ('this may be a silly naive question, but ...'), and mention of the contributor's thoughts/feelings ('I am intrigued'; 'I am interested'; 'I strongly suspect'):

1F)

> I am intrigued by your comment that work such as that represented in WFDT may not be as widely represented in LSA as other work because its argumentation style doesn't lend itself to falsification a la Popper. Could you say a bit more about what you mean here? I am interested because I think similar mismatches in argumentation are at stake in other areas of cognitive science, as well as because I study argumentation as a key (social and cognitive) tool for human knowledge construction.

2F)

> This may be a silly naive question, but isn't it unwise to debate how language is related to other areas of cognition in a forum containing essentially no one with detailed knowledge of those other areas? Wouldn't it be more productive to find a way to bring linguists and psychologists together with researchers from areas such as robotics and computer vision, who (I strongly suspect) are almost underrepresented on this list and in the LSA?

The messages contributed by the single frequent female contributor do not display features of attenuation, no doubt because the writer is an older, well-established scholar whose professional successes lead her to employ a more self-confident

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[6] According to this strategy, 'we', 'us', and 'our' are used to refer to the speaker and his or her associates, excluding the addressee.

discourse style. She does, however, make consistent use of personal/interpersonal strategies, as illustrated in (3):

3F)

> TO: Clark Q. Linguist[7] – How nice to know that there is someone else out there who agrees with some of us out here. I hope you read my reply to the Cog/Ling announcement. Let's keep in touch. Sally Psycholinguist.

In contrast, the adversarial style is employed predominantly by men, especially those male participants who dominated the discussion in terms of frequency and length of contributions. Example (4), from a frequent male contributor, contains strongly-worded assertions, a presupposed truth (it is obvious that...), an imperative form (note), and sarcasm (God's...truth).

4M)

> It is obvious that there are two (and only two) paradigms for the conduct of scientific inquiry into an issue on which there is no consensus. One is (...). But, deplorable as that may be, note that either paradigm (if pursued honestly) will lead to truth anyway. That is, whichever side is wrong will sooner or later discover that fact on its own. If, God forbid, autonomy and/or modularity should turn out to be His truth, then those who have other ideas will sooner or later find this out.

Example (5) below is also sarcastic, but in a way that belittles a specifically-named addressee, "Joe Gradstudent", i.e. by representing the point of the addressee's earlier contribution in such a manner as to make it appear ridiculous. The excerpt also contains self-promotion:

5M)

> Turning to substantive matters, let me first respond to Joe Gradstudent's suggestion that "formal" linguists are being silly by ignoring all the neat phenomena he is interested in. I agree that many of these phenomena are interesting and deserve more attention. Indeed, lest this seem mere rhetoric, let me direct his attention to my paper "FU" (a Chinese character that I can't reproduce here) in the volume Interdisciplinary Approaches to Language: Essays in Honor of S.-Y. Kuroda, edited by Carol Georgopoulos and Roberta Ishihara, Kluwer, 1991, pp. 120-129, in which I discuss the semantics of a Japanese morpheme from a perspective drawn from the work of Elinor Rosch and George Lakoff. Specifically, I propose that this morpheme restricts the denotation to the cognitive reference point, which explains, among other things, why it cannot be added to stems that lack a prototype (a reference point that lies within the extension). So you see, I have some interest in these things

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[7] The pseudonyms in the example messages were supplied by the author of this paper.

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> myself and have read Lakoff's book and some of Rosch's papers. I'm (sort of) one of you, Joe.[8]

While not all of the men involved in the discussion employed adversarial strategies, the fact that such strategies were used by those whose voices were most frequently heard created an overall adversarial tone. This tone was regularly – and negatively – remarked on by those who responded to the survey.

4. Interpretation of results

Although academic professionals of both sexes respond negatively to adversarial discourse, women appear to act differently than men on the basis of their negative response. Women not only produce less adversarial discourse, but are more likely to avoid participating in adversarial exchanges altogether, as the results of the present study show.

Men, on the other hand, appear more accepting of what they view as the academic norm, and may even enjoy contentious aspects of an exchange. As one man remarked: "Actually, the barbs and arrows were entertaining, because of course they weren't aimed at me". Also instructive are the comments of a male survey respondent who contributed several times to the debate:

> It was fun. I became a linguist because I like such discussions. Emotional debate is common both in academic and email discussions. In my opinion, the LINGUIST discussions have not been as heated as some email streams. It is best to try not to take things personally.

These observations are not new, but rather support the conclusions of previous researchers on language and gender. With reference to conversation, Coates (1986) observes:

> Loud and aggressive argument is a common feature of speech in all-male groups: such arguments often focus on trivial issues and are enjoyed for their own sake. Women, however, try to avoid displays of verbal aggressiveness – they find such displays unpleasant and interpret them as meant personally. For women, such displays represent a disruption of conversation, whereas for men they are part of the conventional structure of conversation. (p.153)

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[8] First names alone are used in two contexts in the "cognitive/functional linguistics" debate. First, each of the two women who contributed more than once is addressed by her first name (especially "Sally Psycholinguist", who sometimes signs herself "Sally" as well) by men. Second, men are occasionally referred to by their first name when they are being criticized (either explicitly or implicitly) by the addressor. There is therefore some basis for positing that first-naming signals disrespect, rather than friendliness or personal closeness, in this debate.

Coates' remarks would appear to apply to the discourse of academic computer-mediated discussion groups as well.

In contrast with the tolerant perspective of the male participant quoted above, a female participant gives a more mixed review of the tone of the "cognitive/functional linguistics" debate:

> It was flaming, pushing the bounds of politeness by the standards of in-person discussions. But relatively well-mannered as network discussions go. Some of the comments made me angry: not the mud-slinging but a lot of comments I disagreed with but couldn't respond to (not enough time, didn't feel it would advance the discussion, thought another participant would do a more effective job, etc.).

Whether detached or emotionally involved, these two participants reveal through their comments a common acceptance that computer discussion groups involve "flaming", or adversarial verbal behavior. When one chooses to participate, one must accept (implicitly or otherwise) these terms. However the evidence presented here suggests that a significant majority of women may be unwilling to accept adversarial terms. Consider the comments of three female non-participants (representing a range of status from full professor to Ph.D candidate):

> I was terribly turned off by this exchange, which went on and on forever. I nearly dropped myself from the list of subscribers. (...) Most of the participants – many of them people who should know better – sounded pompous, aggressive, and arrogant, interested in self-aggrandizement and not in the development or discussion of ideas.

> It was not a genuine exploration that was open to other than primary players (...). People were playing hardball with no gloves. Boxing with no teeth-guards. That is inimical to encouraging thoughtful, exploratory discussion. (...) The intensity of the debate made it real clear to me that the various propounders were focused on WINNING whatever round they were in. That is precisely the kind of human interaction that I committedly avoid. (...) I am dismayed that human beings treat each other this way. It makes the world a dangerous place to be. I dislike such people and I want to give them WIDE berth.

> I was disgusted. It's the same old arguments, the same old intentions of defending theoretical territory, the same old inabilities of open and creative thinking, all of which make me ambivalent about academics in general.

Evident in these comments is more than annoyance or disapproval. There is also aversion, an aversion that inhibits the women's involvement – not just in the discussion at hand, but in the discourse of the field more generally.

These observations, if accurate, have important implications for the status of women in linguistics. The findings presented here suggest that gender-based

communicative preferences lead women to avoid participating in activities, even when such activities might otherwise benefit them professionally. The adversarial participants in the "cognitive/functional linguistics" sequence received a number of rewards as a result of their participation. To begin with, their views were acknowledged and debated in a public forum. In addition, eight of the contributors were later contacted privately by a major publisher and invited to publish their views in a book on the cognitive/autonomy issue. Of these eight, five were the most highly adversarial participants in the debate, and all but one ("Sally Psycholinguist") were men. Adversarial rhetoric is publicly condoned in other areas of linguistics as well, e.g. in publishing (especially in certain formalist journals), and in question-and-answer sessions following conference talks. Participation in discourse events of this sort is what defines to a significant extent what it means to be a professional linguist. By avoiding adversarial exchanges, women relegate themselves to the periphery of important discourse events, and consequently to a secondary status within the field.

The alternative, at least in the current state of academia, appears to be for women to adopt the rhetoric of male success, i.e. to participate adversarially. This is the strategy adopted by "Sally Psycholinguist", the only woman to maintain a high profile in the debate. Although "Sally" employs a personal style throughout, she also engages in self-promotion, exclusive references (see ex. (3)), and other adversarial ploys. Indeed, so adversarial is her overall tone that the personal references in her messages tend to generate further adversarial implicatures. Is this to be the measure of female academic success? The comments of the women cited above indicate that they desire a different alternative: "the development and discussion of ideas", "thoughtful, exploratory discussion", and "open and creative thinking", or, interpreting somewhat, emphasis on the content rather than on the rhetorical packaging of ideas. This is a goal shared by many male academics as well. Yet gender-based differences in rhetorical style of the sort identified here constitute an obstacle to achieving this goal.

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Appendix: Survey

To: All LINGUIST list subscribers
Re: Participation in LINGUIST list discussions

I am conducting a sociolinguistic study of participation in the LINGUIST list discussion group. The following is a brief (12 question) survey regarding the debate which took place during February and March of this past year on the use of the term 'cognitive linguistics'. If you read even one contribution to that debate, please take the time to fill out the survey below:

SURVEY

1) A total of 48 messages appeared under the heading 'cognitive linguistics' (or 'language autonomy/modularity') in Feb. and March of this year. What percentage (approximate) of these did you read/glance through?

2) a. Did you contribute to the discussion, and if so, how many times?
   b. If you did not contribute, explain as fully as you can why not (not interested in topic; interested but too busy; interested but felt intimidated; etc.)

3) At times the 'cognitive linguistics' discussion became heated and even personal. As best you can recall, describe your reactions to the discussion at the time.

4) Have you contributed to any other discussions on LINGUIST? How often?

Respondent Information (IMPORTANT)

5) Your academic position (Lecturer [non-tenure track]; Assist/Assoc/Professor; Emeritus; Grad Student; Undergrad; not affiliated with academia)

6) Male or female?

7) Number of years in linguistics (break down into student years/post-grad):

8) a. If you teach, average number of courses taught per year:
   b. Number of courses you were teaching in Feb./March 1991:

9) Principal area of specialization within linguistics:
   (If not primarily a linguist, state major field)

10) If you had to choose, would you describe yourself as more of a 'formalist' or a 'functionalist'?

11) How long have you been using a computer?

12) How comfortable/competent do you feel with computer technology?